

Sundays with Liz

The TV journalist finds her calling with a community show on WBZ and as a youth minister



The Rev. Liz Walker (left, with Adia Cousins) conducts a Tweener Worship Service Sunday mornings at Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church. (Globe Staff / Dina Rudick)

By Johnny Diaz

Globe Staff / November 20, 2007

The Rev. Liz Walker sits at the makeshift altar and gathers her little worshipers.

"We are in a cold room today, but we are going to warm it up with our spirit. Welcome to Tweener Worship Service," she greets her youth ministry of 16 kids at Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Jamaica Plain.

One by one, the giggling and chatty children, ages 7 to 12, share a prayer with an animated Walker, whose sermon on this Sunday morning focuses on the importance of listening.

"To pay attention to God means to pay attention to detail," says Walker, holding a Bible. "You have to look, memorize, and listen."

Most Bostonians know Walker from her two decades as a broadcast journalist anchoring the evening news on WBZ-TV (Channel 4). What they may not know is that she gave all that up to pursue a higher calling - ministry. She earned a master's degree in divinity from Harvard in 2005 and uses that religious training in her work as a youth minister.

To the tweeners in Jamaica Plain, Walker isn't a television news celebrity but simply "Rev. Liz," the light-hearted minister who leads them in prayer, patiently listens to their concerns, and uses the Bible to teach them critical-thinking skills.

"It's not what I thought I would be doing, but it's kind of what has evolved and developed," says Walker, 56, who lives in Brookline. "It's fun teaching this next generation."

Walker says her spiritual summons has given her new perspectives on her life after daily TV news. That career path gradually begat her midlife spiritual journey.

"I feel television news was a training ground for what I am doing now. I feel I am doing in many ways more," Walker says one recent afternoon, sitting in her WBZ office, where she produces a weekly community show "Sunday With Liz Walker." "I am not reporting the news. I am trying to effect change in the world. Life is more exciting now than it ever has been."

MINISTRY NOT PLANNED

Walker's father was a minister in their hometown of Little Rock, Ark., but she says growing up in a minister's household didn't influence her decision to become one.

"It was nothing I had planned to do," says Walker, who arrived in Boston in 1980 to work as a reporter for WBZ. "I actually got into this [TV] business because I thought I could make a difference, shed light on darkness, and change things."

After a year with WBZ, she became Boston's first black anchor of a nightly newscast and one of the few black women in such a position nationally. She anchored the 5 p.m., 6 p.m., and 11 p.m. newscasts through 1999.

In 2000, Walker, a single mother, stepped down from anchoring the evening news to work for the noon newscast, saying she wanted to spend more time with her son, Nicholas, who was 12. "I feel I needed to do something differently. I decided to get off the 11 o'clock, initially to be with my son. It was about being at home and more fully present with my son," says Walker who had divorced Harry Graham in 1998 after seven years of marriage. "I wanted and felt compelled to do something different, something more. Television news wasn't as satisfying."

She sought advice from her church pastors, the Rev. Ray Hammond and his wife, the Rev. Gloria White-Hammond.

"One Sunday morning, in the middle of service, Gloria comes out and whispers [to me], 'Are you ready to accept God's call?' It was a very strange experience, and it felt right. It

was the right question at the right time. My answer was yes," Walker says. "I made the decision I would go to divinity school, that I would at least study what that call meant."

Walker applied to Harvard Divinity School and was accepted. She began in fall 2001.

She quickly learned to balance her daily newscasts at WBZ with her load of term papers at Harvard.

"I started out in two completely different worlds," Walker recalls. "It was interesting to see the reactions of people. Had I become Mother Teresa? Was I entering some nunnery?"

Her biggest challenge: tackling Harvard's two-year language requirement. Walker signed up for biblical Hebrew and failed on the first try.

"The most rewarding thing of my life was that I went back and took it again, and I aced it," she says. "Biblical Hebrew was my trial by fire at Harvard."

It took Walker four years to finish the three-year program, because of her work schedule and her sporadic travels to Sudan. She first visited the country with the Hammonds in the summer of 2001 to learn about slave trade. The hard realities of the Sudanese women, who had been raped and mutilated during the country's 20-year civil war, stirred something in Walker.

In the summer of 2006, Walker decided to use some of the footage from her trips to produce a documentary, "A Glory From the God," starring White-Hammond as she worked to raise awareness about the genocide in Sudan. With help from local workshop leader Maya Balle, Walker created a nonprofit film company, Liz Walker Journey Productions. She screened the film this month at the Boston Public Library and hopes to get it distributed nationally.

"She has transformed," Balle says. "She has become a very different woman because she is taking a stand for what she believes in."

Walker relates her call to ministry with her work in Sudan.

"Telling Gloria's story was a way to put a human face on the crisis but also put a face on the potential solution," Walker says. "Sudan became indelibly connected to what I perceive as my call to ministry."

THINKING ABOUT THEIR FAITH

And so is her work with the tweeners. She preaches to them on Sundays and invites them on social outings such as the movies.

"It's making them aware that they are in a community and that it's not just a Sunday community but a community during the week," Walker says. During a recent weekday hallelujah celebration, Walker passionately stomped, clapped, and sang along with the kids.

"She likes to make things fun," says Denisha Davis, 12, who looked up for Walker's approval as she sang Christian songs. "She is very godly, a good person."

Walker also engages the children to use critical thinking in their faith. "What I am most excited [by] was the idea of not just accepting something because your parents told you to accept but to find out yourself why you believe what you believe," she says. "It's the idea of thinking and not just feeling faith. It's about the mind."

Walker played a game with the kids to illustrate her sermon. She asked the kids to closely study what she wore. Walker then stepped out of the room, removed an earring and her watch, and returned.

"What is different about me?" she asked.

The kids raised their hands and blurted out their answers.

"You're missing a watch," one boy said.

"You have one earring," said another girl.

"To learn, you have to listen, pay attention and study," Walker explains. .

Exchanges like these validate Walker's decision to become a minister.

"In the long run, I affirmed and confirmed my decision many times over," Walker says. "I am very clearly on a spiritual journey."

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